



# DIASPORIC IDENTITY IN JHUMPHA LAHIRI'S *THE NAMESAKE*

<sup>1</sup>M. PREETHI DEVI

<sup>1</sup>Assistant Professor,

<sup>1</sup>Department of English,

<sup>1</sup>Mary Matha College of Arts & Science, Nallakaruanpatti,  
Periyakulam, Theni, India

**Abstract:** Among the American authors in English, Jhumpha Lahiri holds a significant place. Her works mostly address sensitive dilemmas in the lives of Indians or Indian immigrants with themes such as marital difficulties, miscarriages, the quest for identity, and the disconnection between first and second-generation United States immigrants. Her first novel, *The Namesake* was published in 2003. In the novel, Gogol is the protagonist, who is the first-born child of Ashima and Ashoke Ganguli who have emigrated from India to the United States. This paper aims to bring out the confused state of Gogol's quest for identity and what he learns at the end.

**Index Terms - Quest for Identity, Immigrant, Self- Identification, Culture and Emotional Alienation, Tormented**

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Having a sense of identity is the most important thing in everyone's life because it allows people to stand out as individuals, develop a sense of well-being and importance, and fit in with certain groups and cultures. Many cultures and societies have some great value and significance on certain items, which hold symbolic meaning and gain respect from citizens.

Humans always express a sense of identity through verbal and nonverbal means, including language, clothing, and social status. Some historians believe that animals also have a sense of identity. Although some identity has biological origins, identity also exists as a learned behavior. People living in tribes, for instance, learn the specific clothing styles and even normal behaviors of those tribes as they grow up. Identity exists in many forms and ranges from small traits to powerful behaviors. Posture, hairstyle, and type of clothing are classified as forms of identity to help people develop an attachment to like-minded individuals. Certain thoughts and beliefs, such as religious values, are classified as broader-reaching actions surrounding a sense of identity. Identity includes historical characteristics as well as novel trends.

## 2. The quest for identity:

Gogol Ganguli, the protagonist of *The Namesake*, is on a quest: He is compelled to reinvent himself, to achieve a sense of dignity that will overcome the embarrassment of his name. He was born in the United States; he is the son of Ashoke and Ashima Ganguli, who were traditionally married in India, by parental arrangement. They strive to preserve their Bengali culture while freeing their children to become successful Americans. Unlike immigrants of earlier generations, who turned their backs on the old country, knowing they would never return, the Ganguli family travels frequently and with fluid ease between the United States and India, fully at home in neither place.

Gogol's name is a bizarre accident of fate. Ashoke, as a young man in India, survives a terrible train accident and is saved only because the rescuers notice the crumpled page of a book falling from his hand. This is a page from the short stories of the Russian writer Nikolai Gogol. This accident marks Ashoke

physically with a lifelong limp and emotionally with a sense of mystery about his survival when all others in the same railroad car perished.

When his son is born in Boston, Ashoke must name the child on the birth certificate before the infant is released from the hospital. Indian children are given a pen name for the family, with the formal or 'good' name chosen later, when the child's personality has been formed. Ashima's grandmother in India has been chosen to name the boy, but her father has not yet arrived. Ashoke names his son for the author whose book saved his life.

### 3. Cultural and Emotional Alienation

The name is, for Gogol, a symbol of cultural alienation, neither Indian nor American but Russian. Worse still, he learns in high school, that the author, although a genius was mentally disturbed and suicidal. The narrative spans the first thirty-two years of Gogol's life, following him as a young child, then as a schoolboy, continuing through his college years and his early career as an architect. While Gogol is the focus of the story, the narrator, writing in the third person as a distant observer, departs from this position at times to explore the lives of other major characters, who are on their journeys trying to make a sense of their lives.

Ashoke earns his degree in engineering and becomes a tenured professor at a small-town New England college and the family establishes a home on Pemberton Road. A man of the working world, Ashoke successfully adapts to American ways in his public life. However, he and Ashima socialize with their Bengali friends- immigrants who share their traditions. Ashoke and Gogol are outwardly respectful to each other, but Ashoke is puzzled and saddened by his son's emotional distance. Ashima, a homemaker in the old-world tradition, is torn between the old ways and the new. She wears a sari throughout her life and cooks Indian food but adopts American customs for the sake of her children. Her Thanksgiving turkey is seasoned with garlic and cumin, and she decorates an artificial Christmas tree. The scenes in Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake* are fraught with tension between the two cultures.

### 4. Identity Crisis:

Gogol is convinced that he has to change his name and his parents realize that there is no other way he can escape his predicament. Therefore, Gogol changes his name to Nikhil as he begins his freshman year at Yale. Surprisingly, he learns that Nikolai Gogol also renamed himself simplifying his surname at the age of twenty- two.

As everything around him at Yale is new, going by a new name does not seem strange to Gogol. Even his parents adjust to it by calling him Nikhil in front of his friends. But this change to name does not change the course of luck in his life. Like the life and characters of Nikolai Gogol, his life two seems to be mingled with pathos and black humor. Gogol's relationships with women are also doomed to failure. Passing attraction for Ruth whom he meets on a crowded train as well as his affair with Maxine leave him disappointed and alone. Separated by cultural differences between them, Nikhil steps out of Maxine's life a few months after his father's death.

### 5. Summing Up:

If cultural similarities can bind a couple together, Moushumi and Gogol should have fared better. But the American way of life makes inroads into the marital life of this Indian couple. When he realizes that, Moushumi is having an affair. In the end, all these experiences make Gogol a disheartened, yet mature individual.

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